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ABSTRACT

The impact of poor literacy and numeracy skills on employment and unemployment in Australia and elsewhere was examined through two case studies and a literature review. The first case study examined the role of literacy provision in helping 27 unemployed jobseekers find employment. The second focused on literacy and teamwork in the activities of local council workers with responsibilities for cleaning and repairing small drains and performing small construction jobs. Although statistics on literacy and numeracy indicate a relationship with employment status, that relationship is not necessarily "causal." Despite the fact that many individuals referred to literacy and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs welcomed the opportunity to develop their skills and believed that such programs would lead to jobs, literacy had played a minor role in their past work histories and appeared unlikely to have a big impact on their current chances of gaining employment. Although many of the local council workers were being targeted for their lack of literacy skills, it was difficult to demonstrate that their lack of literacy/numeracy skills had a significant impact on their job performance. The case studies provided evidence that, rather than causing unemployment or limited economic opportunities, limited literacy and numeracy skills are themselves caused by economic conditions and limited employment opportunities. (Contains 100 references.) (MN)

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Whose economic wellbeing?: A challenge to dominant discourses on the relationship between literacy and numeracy skills and (un)employment

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This paper forms part of a project which examines the relationship between literacy and numeracy skills and a range of indicators of wellbeing, with the key focus in this paper being employment, and its corollary, unemployment. Most people assume this relationship to be relatively unproblematic because the discourse on the role of literacy, (and to a lesser extent numeracy) and (un)employment is well known. When, for example, the former federal Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Dr Kemp in the midst of a recent 'literacy crisis' stated: *There are direct links between poor literacy, school drop out rates and youth unemployment* (DEETYA 1996a: 1), few people would have questioned this statement. Most people believe, and would rarely challenge the view that literacy and numeracy skills are essential requirements for employment in the current globalised world, and that lacking literacy and numeracy skills may contribute to, in fact may cause, unemployment. To promote dialogue and debate on these issues, my aim in this paper is to challenge these common sense understandings with an alternative critical discourse.

The dominant discourse on literacy, numeracy and employment

An appropriate starting point is a brief outline of the dominant discourse on literacy, numeracy and (un)employment. At the outset, however, I need to point to the research and policy bias to date in favour of the role of literacy. Numeracy has not featured so prominently and is sometimes subsumed within a broader definition of literacy (for example, see DEET 1991a: 9, and the notion of quantitative literacy in Kirsch *et al* 1993) or included within a term such as 'basic skills'. Often, and particularly in recent government reports, researchers refer to literacy and numeracy as one, failing to make a strong distinction between the skills (e.g. Lee and Miller 2000, Miller and Chiswick 1997, Rahmani 2000). The bias in favour of literacy is reflected in this paper as I refer predominantly to literacy studies, though, as with many other studies, to some extent numeracy is inferred in discussions on literacy. I do nevertheless make reference to some recent significant numeracy studies.

Literacy skills assume enormous significance in contemporary Western society. Citing the former Minister Dr Kemp, again, he stated in a media release that: *The single most important mission of schools is to provide every student with adequate literacy skills* (DEETYA 1996a: 1). Literacy is generally equated with success in life, with notions of a person being 'educated', obtaining a job and having access to the 'goods' and trappings of wellbeing that are valued highly in society. The corollary to this perspective is that lack of literacy has dire consequences. For example, on the first page of the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP) we find the following unequivocal statement:

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There is a strong and well demonstrated relationship between low levels of literacy or English language competence and high levels of unemployment and other forms of social disadvantage (DEET 1991a: 1).

The relationship between literacy skills and (un)employment has received particularly high prominence since the late 1980s with increasing recognition that if the skills of the nation's workforce do not improve then the nation will become uncompetitive in a globalised economy (see Dawkins and Holding 1987; DEET 1991a/b). Dawkins, former federal Minister for the Department of Employment, Education and Training, for example, claimed that for Australians: ... *literacy is the difference between competing in international markets with a well trained workforce - and stagnation* (International Literacy Year 1991). Further, there have been claims that lack of literacy or low literacy skills in workplaces costs the nation billions of dollars in lost productivity each year (Miltenyi 1989, Singh 1989). Commonly, lack of literacy is represented as a scourge, with negative implications for the economic security and productivity of individuals, enterprises and the nation generally (DEET 1991b: 20-23). It is seen to restrict the ability of workers to adapt to new technology and new workplace practices, and leads to safety concerns, costly mistakes and a host of other negative features (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1991: 18-26). Not surprisingly, in view of this dominant discourse, federal governments since the early 1990s have channeled considerable funds into both literacy programs in workplaces (the Workplace English Language and Literacy program, WELL) and for the unemployed (see DEET 1991a/b, 1996, DEETYA 1996b, Rahmani 2000).

Australia, of course, is not alone in focusing on literacy skills and (un)employment. The recent Moser Report in the United Kingdom (Moser Report 1999) for example, makes explicit the economic implications of low literacy (and numeracy) skills, and in the United States improving the literacy skills of workers has long been regarded as integral to economic development (e.g. Chisman and Campbell 1990; Darkenwald and Valentine 1984, Newman and Beverstock 1990). Literacy programs are also claimed to be an essential aspect of recent 'welfare-to-work' initiatives in the United States (Martin and Fisher 1999). Perhaps the best international examples of the stated relationship between literacy skills and economic wellbeing are the many OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) reports over the last decade (e.g. OECD 1992, 1995, 1997, OECD/Statistics Canada 2000). These reports draw on international comparisons of literacy rates using standardised measures and they all strongly recommend a focus on improving literacy skills as the 'key' to unlocking the benefits of globalisation (e.g. OECD 1995: 23).

Organisations such as the OECD are respected authorities on economic development. Their reports, together with many government reports and academic opinions, some of which are cited in this paper, represent a powerful and dominant voice on the relationship between literacy skills and aspects of employment. They are part of a broader human capital discourse which sees education as an investment which will lead to greater economic productivity. Literacy skills are, as one government publication put it: *Just like farmland and goldmines, we can use them to help our country to grow and prosper in the 21st century* (DEET 1992a: 1, Wickert and Baynham 1994). They are skills that are seen to add to the economic value of people, to increase their exchange value in the labour market (see Marginson 1993, 1997).

Within this discourse literacy skills are elevated; they are viewed as a set of technical skills which, once acquired, usually lead to positive employment outcomes. This 'model' of literacy has been termed 'autonomous' by Street (1984, 1993) because literacy is considered a cognitive skill relatively autonomous of social context. In many studies based on this model the literacy levels of particular groups of people are measured using a range of indicators, and usually higher literacy levels are found to correlate with higher income/status jobs, and the reverse is the case for lower literacy levels (for recent Australian studies, see Lee and Miller 2000; Miller and Chiswick 1997). The measures or the indicators of literacy vary considerably across different studies, ranging from the estimations and beliefs of employers and their organisations (see House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1991: 9-12), to sophisticated statistical surveys conducted across a range of standardised literacy related tasks (e.g. OECD 1995, 1997, OECD/Statistics Canada 2000, Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997). On the basis of both these beliefs and the statistical findings powerful institutions invariably assume the authority to identify individuals and groups of people as lacking or deficient in literacy skills and to 'prescribe' some form of literacy provision for the economic wellbeing of all concerned; individuals, enterprises, and the nation. I use the word 'prescribe' here as it relates to some observations made by Freebody (1992: 73) almost a decade ago in which he stated:

We are never describing literacy activities, no matter how commonsensical our assertions may be. We are always prescribing, saying what should be, and so presenting ourselves as arbiters of what counts as literacy to a community that has not generally learned to read our announcements critically ...

These comments appear to correspond to the situation involving powerful and influential organisations like the OECD with their International Adult Literacy Surveys (IALS) based on standardised measures. These surveys with their seemingly 'objective' findings lead to commonsensical assertions about the state of literacy in different countries, and they enable the OECD and others (government agencies in particular which draw on the OECD findings) to present themselves as arbiters of what counts as literacy and to 'prescribe' solutions involving the need for increased literacy provision.

The new literacy studies

My approach to the role of literacy (and numeracy, explained later) differs from the dominant one outlined above. Rather than focus on measuring the extent to which different individuals or groups of people possess a particular set of literacy skills, my focus is on what literacy actually means to these people. It involves analysing how literacy is used and valued by people in different social contexts seen from their own perspective, and it follows from the work of researchers such as Freebody (1992) who argues for the need to study 'in a principled ethnographic sense' everyday literacy practices in specific communities. This shift from a focus on standardised 'skills' to literacy 'practices' relates to the distinction Street (1984, 1993) makes between an 'autonomous' model of literacy described briefly earlier, and an 'ideological' model, one based on studies of literacy practices in a range of social contexts and which often brings into focus the central role of power relations (Street 1993: 2). From another

perspective, especially in relation to the OECD surveys, we can see this distinction to be about quantitative and qualitative research, between measuring an apparently neutral and 'objective' literacy using standardised tests (the IALS), as distinct from trying to understand through ethnographic studies the use of a wide range of literacy practices in a cultural context imbued with ideology and subjectivity (see Druine and Wildermeersch 2000: 396-7). Critics of the IALS point out that standardised literacy measures are unlikely to accurately describe the literacy activities/practices of the groups of people surveyed largely because they fail to adequately account for different cultural contexts (see Hamilton and Barton 2000).

This reconceptualisation of literacy based on literacy practices and sociocultural context has been referred to as the 'new literacy studies' (e.g. Barton 1994, Gee 1990, Street 1993) which gained popularity mainly from the mid/early1980s based on the ethnographic studies of sociolinguists such as Heath (1983) and Levine (1986), and anthropologists such as Street (1984). In the past decade or so many more academic studies have contributed to the new literacy studies to the extent that, at an academic level at least, there is now a serious challenge to the dominance of the more traditional 'autonomous' model of literacy (see, for example, Baker and Luke 1990, Barton and Hamilton 1998, Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic 2000, Barton and Ivanic 1991, Baynham 1995, Cook-Gumperz 1986, Gee 1990, Gowen 1992, Hull 1993, Lankshear 1997, Luke and Freebody 1997, Prinsloo and Breier 1996, Street 1993). As I will indicate later, however, there are powerful interests at stake in maintaining the dominance of the autonomous model.

The 'new literacy studies' focus on the social nature of literacy, on micro literacy events and the practices that shape them that are used by people in their everyday lives (see Barton 1991, Barton and Hamilton 2000). These practices are so numerous and varied that many researchers now refer to literac*ies* rather than the one literacy. Barton and Hamilton (1998), for example, in their ethnographic study of the literacy events and practices of a local community in the north of England identified a wide range of local or vernacular literacies. These involved people's diaries, notes, lists, cards, newsletters, sale notices, souvenirs and myriad other literacy related activities not regulated by formal institutional rules, and featuring diversity and hybridity.

As part of this 'social turn' as Gee (2000) calls it, numeracy studies have also developed along similar lines (see Baker 1995, 1998, Baker and Street 1994, Johnston *et al* 1997, Lave 1988). Baker (1998: 38), for example, argues that numeracy is usually presented as *a set of pure skills separate from contexts in which they may be used,* and it can be seen to fall within an 'autonomous model' drawing parallels to Street's (1984, 1993) use of the term with literacy. Numeracy 'as social practice', by contrast, involves the uses of numeracy (or numera*cies*) in cultural contexts and acknowledges power relations (i.e. an 'ideological model'). A builder, for example, will use string to compare the lengths of diagonals in approaching the practical problem of establishing a right angle, which is a quite different approach to that of a mathematician, and yet, it is the school-based formal mathematics of the latter (the 'autonomous model') that is valued and given power and status in society (Baker 1998: 39-41).

Importantly, ethnographic studies of literacy practices reveal the role of social networks. People do not necessarily engage in these practices in isolation. Many

studies indicate that literacy practices can involve sharing, such as a group reading of a letter (see Heath 1983), or assistance with literacy related tasks can be exchanged for other services in a local community (Fingeret 1983, Moll 1992). Often, people act as 'mediators' or literacy 'brokers' in assisting others (Barton and Hamilton 1998, Baynham 1993). In the workplace which is most relevant for this paper, increasingly there is evidence that within informal 'communities of practice' workers engage collaboratively with literacy practices (e.g. Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996, Gowen 1994, Hart-Landsberg and Reder 1995).

As I have indicated in relation to Street's (1984, 1993) 'ideological' model of literacy, ethnographic studies of literacy practices usually reveal relations of power. Barton and Hamilton (1998: 7), for example, state that these practices: *are patterned by social institutions and power relations, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others*. To better understand questions and struggles over power relations involving dominant and marginalised literacies, it is useful to work within a conceptual framework of discourses, a term which has already featured strongly in this paper. In a broad sense, the term discourse is used here to help to explain how people's beliefs and attitudes result from the way they are socialised into viewing and acting in the world. Gee (1990: 142, 1999: 7), a leading literacy theorist understands a discourse (though he distinguishes it with a capital D) to be about identifying oneself with a member of a socially meaningful group, involving the sharing of beliefs, values and behaviours, in fact, 'ways of being in the world'. Most people, however, are unaware that their beliefs, and especially those involving literacy, form part of a discourse which has ideological and therefore political implications. This is largely because, as Fairclough (1989) illustrates, these beliefs, have become 'naturalised'; they are taken-for-granted, common sense understandings which have become accepted by most people as apolitical 'truths'. The more dominant and popular the beliefs, the more natural and commonsensical they appear, which of course is the situation with the relationship between literacy skills and economic wellbeing.

In depth studies of literacy practices in different local sites, however, often contradict this dominant discourse. What follows is a brief outline of some 'critical ethnographies' of workplace related sites undertaken in the past decade and even earlier:

- Holmes and Storrie (1985) in a small British study of a retraining program involving basic skills for retrenched steel workers illustrated the program was largely a sham. There was no alternative work to be retrained for in the steel town, and the program could be seen to be conducted largely as a means of pacifying former steel workers.
- Gowen (1992), studied a workplace literacy program involving housekeeping, food service and laundry workers in a United States hospital, a program which was narrowly conceived and attempted to change the behaviour of these workers to bring them into line with management expectations. The program failed to acknowledge and value the existing work practices of these workers which in many cases were more appropriate to the work context.
- In a later study Gowen (1996) examined workplace literacy issues in a manufacturing company in the process of moving towards 'total quality'. She found that, despite management's focus on worker skill deficiencies, literacy

played a relatively minor role in this work as most of the work was informal and relied on oral communication. She concluded that the focus on worker skill deficiencies effectively enabled management to privilege their own more powerful positions.

- Hull's (1993, 1997) work with bank clerks illustrated how inflating the credentials for access to jobs often did not relate to the skills required on the job.
- Hull's work featured in Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) with operator level teams in an electronics assembly plant indicated contradictions in the 'new work order'. The discourse stressed cooperation and worker empowerment, but in practice top-down hierarchies often continued to operate.
- Darrah's (1996, 1997) research in a Californian manufacturing company indicated that the failure of teams to work effectively had more to do with organisational and structural factors than lack of workers' skills.
- Tannock's (1997) study of a workplace literacy program in a canning factory demonstrated that even with the cooperation of unions, the interactions between teacher and worker closed off the free expression of workers' ideas and opinions and aligned them to attitudes and behaviours favourable to management.
- Holland (2001) in a British study showed that unions were largely at one with government and business in their understanding of the dominant discourse on literacy which focused exclusively on what workers lacked. Union promotion of government sponsored initiatives aimed at increasing the 'skills for life' of workers was unlikely to assist workers in their jobs.
- Jackson (2000) indicated that the focus in new workplaces practices on the 'textualisation' of work, on documenting everything or 'writing up', served to make workers 'subject to' workplace texts, which led to high stress and brought workers within more oppressive power relations.
- Similarly, Farrell (2001) focused on 'textual practices' in the new work order, and showed how 'expert outsiders' (including teachers) encouraged a shift in the legitimacy of knowlege claims at work from those based on individual expertise to abstract and generalisable claims. This had the effect of threatening existing worker identities and existing worker relationships.

Most of these studies focus on the perspectives of the workers, those 'subject to' the dominant discourse on literacy and (un)employment (see Black 2001: 4-12), and invariably these perspectives contradict this discourse in various ways. But such is the apparent 'common sense' and naturalness of this discourse that most people, including those closely involved with workplace literacy issues (government officials, administrators, company representatives, teachers) continue to believe and thus help to maintain this dominant discourse (see Castleton 2000).

In the following two sections I will briefly outline some of my own research which reinforces the arguments I wish to make in this paper. There are two studies; the first involves unemployed people, and the second involves maintenance and construction workers in a local council.

Case study No.1 - Literacy and the unemployed

In 1991 the federal government released its Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP), and an important part of that policy was funding for jobseeker literacy

programs. So began funding for jobseeker literacy programs which have survived changes of federal governments and continue today, though in a modified form.

Clearly, these programs were designed from the outset to assist the unemployed to get work, and they have always been underpinned by the assumption that low literacy is a factor which contributes to, and indeed may cause, unemployment. From late 1991 unemployed people, and especially those considered long term unemployed, were referred by the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) to literacy providers. Jobseekers often had little choice other than to participate because the program fell within a process known as 'reciprocal obligation', that is, in return for income support jobseekers were obliged to *take up any reasonable offer of assistance and do whatever they can to improve their employment prospects* (DEET 1992b: 17).

For my research study I interviewed a total of twenty-seven CES 'clients' who were referred to a TAFE college in early 1993 (see Black 1995a, 2001). There were more males than females (16 male, 11 female); and most of the respondents spoke languages other than English at home (19).

Many of the respondents indicated they were happy to be referred to a literacy program, especially those with poor oral skills in English. It seemed a welcome opportunity to develop their skills in spoken and written English, and furthermore, they seemed to believe that it would lead, in some cases almost magically, to jobs. This corresponds to Auerbach's (1994: 10) contention that;

One of the biggest myths that ESL learners hold on to is that English is the solution to their problem, that the reason they have low status jobs is that their English isn't good enough and if only it were better, everything would be fine.

Everything was not so fine for other respondents. The English speaking background respondents in particular were far more pragmatic. They would only attend a literacy program if they could see a direct link to jobs, and most could not. These respondents, despite the risk of losing their unemployment allowances, left the program early.

For some respondents the chances of gaining employment appeared remote, regardless of their level of literacy. One had back problems and a compensation claim pending following an accident while working on the railways. Another had a dust allergy and was unable to work in a factory, besides, as he stated, in his previous line of work: *no need talk with machine*. One man was sixty and ready to retire. Another, Mary, at fifty, after spending many years in a clothing factory and working as a cleaner, felt she should not be forced to attend a literacy program. She had always found work in the past, and had no difficulties working as a hospital cleaner. She felt that improving her literacy skills would make little or no difference to her job prospects.

An in-depth examination of the previous work histories of the respondents indicated that literacy had played but a minor role. Mario, for example, had to seek out his wife in order to produce written quotes in his work as a building sub-contractor. But he nevertheless managed OK; his employment was not threatened. Similarly, two Lebanese respondents relied to some extent on their wives for literacy support in managing food outlets, but it was more of an occasional frustration than any form of

disadvantage in the workplace. The inescapable conclusion from the interviews was that literacy had not played a significant part in the employment outcomes of these respondents in the past, and so why should literacy make a difference now? Had the nature of work changed overnight? Or were there other agendas operating? I will address these questions later in this paper.

Case study No. 2 - Literacy and teamwork

The second case study features local council workers with responsibilities for cleaning and repairing drains and small construction jobs such as footpaths and roundabouts. The enterprising manager of the depot was in the process of restructuring the traditional work 'gangs' into 'competitive teams'. The 'competitive marketplace' (see Hilmer Report 1993) had resulted in other local councils being pressured to either 'contract out' some services or to establish profit-based 'business units'. The depot manager introduced 'competitive teams' ostensibly as a means of warding off these measures in this council. If his new 'teams' could become competitive with outside contractors then their jobs with the council could be saved. Maintenance and construction workers therefore had little choice - essentially they were told to become competitive or they would lose their jobs.

The manager and two of his supervisors were concerned that the existing workers might not have the skills to work effectively in competitive teams, and there was talk of establishing a literacy class. The 'new' work involved workers taking greater responsibility for ordering supplies and equipment, organising their time, and keeping track of their costings. Reference was made to workers needing to be 'teched up': *I mean, we're talking about putting computers in trucks* (supervisor). The manager mentioned that the new 'teams' were expected to be able to quote for work while on the job, and not to simply refer it to the engineers for an assessment at a later date.

My research study involved observing workplace practices and recording in-depth interviews with fifteen of the local council workers, in addition to the manager and his supervisors. The aim was to examine both the literacy practices involved in this type of work and the skills of the workers to undertake these practices (Black 1998, 2001). All the workers were male, most from English speaking backgrounds, most lacked formal schooling, and the average age of the respondents was 48 years.

Although the manager of the depot stated his team members would need to have *a reasonably high level of literacy*, observing the teams 'in practice' revealed few literacy practices were in fact required in this line of work. Most team members were required only to 'sign on', and the main form of communication was oral, both informally within teams, and by two-way radio with the depot. If a written report was required, such as an incident report documenting an accident such as cutting through underground cables, team members would not normally write their own report: *That normally comes up with Vincent ... Vincent's the cost clerk, but he's in charge of all the incident reports* (supervisor's comments). Numeracy skills appeared more significant, such as calculating concrete pours, but these were soon learnt on the job: *... you've only got to multiply the width by the length ... give us three by four is twelve, that's 1.2 (cubic metres), that's four inches (100mm in depth) ... you learn that* (supervisor). This was not the sort of academic maths learnt at school involving the understanding of underlying concepts, instead, it was an example of performance

driven numeracy, that is, numeracy learnt 'in practice' (Baker 1998). But even these practices were not undertaken by everyone on the teams; it was the team leader who assumed most responsibilities for the calculations and all 'paperwork', after all, he was paid more to do this.

While some workers admitted they had poor literacy and numeracy skills in a formal schooling sense, as with the concrete pour calculations above, this had little impact on their work performance. As another worker stated: *Well, I get by on jobs here, like, I can lay bricks, got me truck licence through here ... I can do whatever I find in my life that I need to be able to do ...* Even a task such as quoting the cost of a new driveway would not prove difficult. There would always be someone on the team who could provide assistance with a written quote.

Social networks of support were crucial in this type of work. While the manager had established 'competitive teams', from the workers' perspective, they were still in 'gangs' with the same rules of 'mateship' applying. All that had changed for them was the nomenclature, and the fact that some people received extra pay for being team leaders, an issue which had become a source of division within the workforce. In fact, there were deep divisions within this workforce. Some workers regarded the extra pay for team leaders as a form of 'bribery': ... *bribe one man to get the best out of the rest.* There was deep resentment and cynicism directed towards management at the 'town hall' for their priorities which appeared not to include maintenance and construction activities. Over the years the number of staff at the town hall, and their remuneration, had increased exponentially, and yet here in the maintenance and construction depot workforce numbers had been reduced and as one workers stated: *I'm not much better than a person living on the dole, and then I come here and I cop this* (workplace reforms, and a manager who said he wanted his workers to be happy at work in the way that he was).

As part of the shift to competitive teams all workers were obliged to attend formal training sessions conducted by the manager and supervisors who extolled the virtues of working 'competitively. Many workers resented this formal training. They were especially opposed to American videos featuring Tom Peters: ... *you see videos, every video you see is on an assembly line track ... American, Yanks, you must do this.* They also resented a return to a formal learning environment which had not served them well in the past: ... *You know, I feel like a school kid again.* When asked in the interviews about the type of training they would prefer, these workers suggested they wanted to learn on-the-job and from their fellow workers: ... *they'd have to have someone, right, you go out with that gang, you stay there for a fortnight, you learn the way that they do this ...*

Any formalised literacy or numeracy program envisaged by management would have failed with this group of workers. Quite apart from the resistance of these workers to formal learning environments, the literacy and numeracy practices in this line of work did not warrant it. These practices could easily be managed on the job with workers learning from each other, from within their own 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). This type of learning promoted by the workers seems to fit within Lankshear's (1998) notion of 'cultural apprenticeship' involving peers working on authentic tasks with experts in a supportive environment (see also Hull 1997: 25).

It was apparent that there were two views on reality in this workplace: one, a new culture guided by visions of a new work order expounded in current management texts (knowledge workers, working smarter, more flexibly); the other, an old culture based on the lived, conflict-oriented experiences of workers borne out of a history of struggles with management (see Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996: 31).

Micro/macro links

The above two case studies challenge aspects of the dominant discourse on literacy/numeracy and (un)employment. In this section I will indicate some of the links between the micro aspects of the everyday lives of individuals and groups revealed in these two case studies, and the political economy, the broader macro-structural aspects of power. It is this 'meshing' of micro and macro aspects that is promoted by social researchers such as Marcus and Fischer (1986) and Layder (1993) and which represents the 'critical turn' in the history of qualitative/ethnographic research (see Denzin and Lincoln 1999).

Looking first at unemployed people referred to literacy programs, the interviews indicated that while in a normative 'schooled' literacy sense the respondents were found lacking, this had not prevented them from working in the past. At the time of the interviews in 1993 Australia was in the midst of an economic recession, and essentially it was the economic climate that had changed and resulted in so much unemployment, not people's lack of skills. Although the nature of work has changed rapidly, especially in the past couple of decades, not all jobs are now in leading edge industries requiring meta-level knowledge (e.g.Levett and Lankshear 1994). On the contrary, most new jobs in Australia and in overseas developed nations are predicted to be in the low paid retail, trade and service sectors (see DEET 1995, Apple 1999), and many of these jobs will involve *repetitive and deskilled textual competence* (Luke 1992: 9). This, of course, does not prevent employers from 'screening out' applicants on the basis of their literacy/numeracy ability in the belief that those with better skills may have other favourable work traits (such as drive, compliance with rules etc - see Rubenson 1989: 389, Street 1990: 6). But it does indicate that many jobs do not require high levels of literacy and numeracy ability.

It can be argued that the issue is not so much a widening 'skills gap', rather, a 'widening jobs gap', particularly in poor economic times (see Hart 1992: 76). From a government and business point of view, however, it is precisely this poor economic climate that encourages a focus on lack of skills, because in so doing, responsibility for the problem of unemployment shifts to those who can be identified as having a literacy 'problem' (see Black 1995b). That is, by highlighting the common sense notion that people cannot get jobs because they lack literacy skills; the responsibility (the blame) effectively resides with them, and the government's role is then to provide these people with assistance (i.e. literacy programs). Politically, this strategy is likely to be more effective, and certainly easier, than focusing on the real cause of unemployment, the crisis of the political economy of capitalism: *... the structural problems of poverty, of the de-skilling and elimination of jobs, of capital flight, of systemic racism and sexism, problems that are 'naturally' generated out of our current economic and political arrangements* (Apple 1987: viii).

While statistics on literacy and numeracy levels indicate a relationship with employment status, that relationship is not necessarily 'causal'. Behind the statistics are a host of complex variables. Macro-structural factors such as manufacturing enterprises moving off-shore in the pursuit of cheap labour are more likely to relate to the 'cause' of unemployment than lack of literacy or numeracy skills. Moreover, in recent years the whole basis of human capital theory has been questioned by some educators (e.g. Porter 1993), with leading literacy theorists such as Luke (1992: 10) maintaining: *there are no across-the-board connections between increased literacy skills and economic activity.*

In the case of the local council workers, they also were being targeted for their lack of literacy skills, though 'in practice', it was difficult to demonstrate that lack of literacy or numeracy skills was significant in their work performance. The manager and his supervisors wanted changes from their workers, but improved literacy skills were not the main issue. They wanted their workers to take on a new social identity; to work with renewed commitment and enthusiasm, to be 'happy' even. (Black 2001: 201). Lack of literacy was in effect a 'code' used by management to indicate that workers lacked this new social identity, this new set of beliefs and values aligned with those of management. The 'new work order' can be seen to represent a 'soft touch hegemony' (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996: 23), a discourse which on the surface appears to be in the interests of workers. In encouraging workers to identify themselves with the core values of the company/enterprise, however, the primary purpose is not worker happiness, an 'enchanted workplace' (Gee 1994) , but increased productivity. Many of the maintenance and construction workers recognised this sub text in the changeover to 'competitive teams' because they had a distrust of management borne out of conflict over many years. Publicly they went along with the changes because they had little choice - their jobs depended on their compliance, but privately they resisted it (see Foley 1999 for examples of worker resistance and alienation).

I would argue based on my studies that there *is* a causal relationship between literacy (and numeracy) and (un)employment, but that it is the *opposite* to the dominant discourse outlined at the beginning of this paper. Lack of literacy and numeracy skills *do not cause* unemployment or limited employment opportunities. Rather, it is these economic conditions that *cause* literacy and numeracy problems. They give rise to the need for governments and others, acting in the interests of capital, to *produce* and inflate literacy and numeracy problems, even though, as an increasing number of ethnographies of workplaces indicate, literacy and numeracy are not the problem, or at least not the main problem. While this perspective is unconventional in the current 'new times', it is not original. As Aronowitz and Giroux (1985: 66) in a critique of the 'literacy crisis' of the 1970s stated, the problem of low literacy or functional illiteracy: *is produced by the constitution of the job market by economic and social inequality and political powerlessness.*

Implications for policy and rese rch

In the current political and economic climate the implications of the above perspective are such that they are unlikely to be taken seriously by those with dominant interests. Essentially, I am arguing that literacy and numeracy skills may not be the significant factors in the economic development of individuals, enterprises and the nation that they are made out to be, and that where there is a need to improve literacy and

numeracy *practices* in workplaces, this can often be accomplished effectively through informal networks of assistance from fellow workers. That is, workers in 'communities of practice', learning through a process of 'apprenticeship' from more experienced and skilled workers (see Billett 1999, Lankshear 1998, Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998).

The policy implications of this perspective are immense. For a start, it would undermine important elements of neo-liberal ideology which currently results in a great many people of low socio-economic status being identified as 'deficient' and being blamed for economic woes (see Apple 1999). Thus there would be the need to look to other factors in explaining away poor economic performance. In particular, it would call into question the rationale for the provision of literacy and numeracy programs with solely economic ends, specific government funded programs such as those for unemployed people and those for people in employment (e.g. WELL programs). Such a perspective would question the validity of the now obligatory standardised literacy 'measure', the National Reporting System, which currently (like the IALS internationally) identifies those in need of literacy and numeracy provision (see critique of the IALS by Hamilton and Barton 2000). And there would be implications also for a professional sector comprising trainers, teachers and organisational advocates whose interests are bound up with an inflated 'autonomous' notion of literacy and numeracy. The starting point for many of these people/organisations would need to be the 'culture' of the workplace, and how to work within existing 'communities of practice'.

The implications for research are significant also. There would be a new research focus on in-depth studies of literacy and numeracy practices in the whole range of workplace contexts. In particular more would need to be known about numeracy practices given the current research imbalance which is reflected in this paper. There would be a shift towards researching the perspectives of workers, of 'hearing other voices' (Hull 1993), rather than those of management which currently predominates. The 'politics' of workplace literacy would be highlighted. Questions would be asked of the extent to which teachers are aware of the political implications of their teaching in workplace contexts and whether their position in relation to the human capital discourse can be characterised as 'mute opposition beneath a passive acquiescence' (see Lee and Wickert 1995: 145). Teachers would need to learn to become more 'strategic' in their approach to teaching and learning (Foley 2001) and would need to learn to interrogate workplace curriculum/texts in order to better represent the interests of workers (see Castleton 2000, Farrell 2001, Jackson 2000).

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Title of paper:
Whose economic wellbeing?: A challenge to dominant discourses on the relationship between literacy and numeracy skills and (un)employment

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